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Looking on the bright side: malls doing extra song and dance to attract holiday shoppers.

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From giving away a new home to recruiting volunteer ambassadors, Indianapolis malls are working hard to put a happy face on what economists predict will be a bleak holiday season for retailers.

Several local shopping centers are putting a little extra umph into their marketing activities this December in an effort to lure shoppers and, once they get them in, encourage them to stick around for a while.

They're doing so with tighter budgets resulting from the slow economy. That forces the malls to look for inexpensive ways to increase sales. One such method involves putting more emphasis on customer service.

Washington Square has gotten into that spirit by recruiting about 35 "mall walkers" to serve as "ambassador elves" during December.

The elves are volunteering their time to greet shoppers at mall entrances, provide directions, open doors, and distribute shopping bags, said Sara Zappia, manager of Washington Square.

"Mall walkers probably know the mall better than anyone," Zappia said. "It's a lot easier for them to tell people where stores are than to hire somebody new."

The eastside mall also has erected a new Santa chalet, a large red-and-white house complete with tall "ice trees," a snowman, and animated reindeer and elves. Other animated figures are located throughout the center.

Washington Square, Lafayette Square and Castleton Square malls, all owned and operated by Ohio-based Edward J. DeBartolo Corp., are going so far as to give away a new home.

On Dec. 13, winners of keys to the "Home for the Holidays" promotion will have the opportunity to see if their keys unlock the door to a new home that has been erected in the mall.

The promotion is a joint venture including Davis Building Corp., WXXP Radio in Anderson, and the three malls, said Nancy Schaub, administrative assistant for marketing at Castleton Square. Shoppers at all of the malls have had the opportunity to enter the drawing since September.

The malls also are trying to make shopping easier for customers.

Washington and Castleton have published holiday gift guides for the first time. The guides promote gift items, divided into separate price categories, available in stores throughout the mall. Both malls also are offering fashion shows and product demonstrations showcasing a variety of merchandise supplied by mall tenants.

Castleton has extended the traditional **bridal registry** concept to comprise all members of the family during the holidays. Forms available at all mall stores allow shoppers to list the gifts they would like to receive. The mall's customer information center collects the forms and mails them to whomever the potential recipient would like.

Greenwood Park Mall is targeting certain groups of shoppers with its "Moms' night" and "Men's night," which the center is cosponsoring along with WKLR-FM 93.

WKLR DJs Cindy Wine and Tammy Lively were on hand to welcome moms Dec. 4, when the first 500 moms received lottery tickets and shopping bags filled with coupons and product samples, said Michelle Steiner, marketing director for the mall. All moms were treated to free stroller rental, free gift wrap and food samples. Shoppers also competed for a trip for two to Aruba.

Wine and Lively, along with several Indiana Pacemates, will offer shopping tips at "Men's Night" Dec. 18. "They're last-minute shoppers, so we have it late in the season," Steiner explained.

Dec. 14 will feature a "Holiday Shopping Spectacular" at Glendale

Center. Members of Tau Kappa Epsilon, a fraternity at Butler University, will don tuxedos and act as doormen and gift wrappers in exchange for the mall's donation to St. Jude Children's Hospital, said Jim Anderson, marketing manager for the northside mall.

Glendale's \$2.99 Santa photo, which rivals the lowest prices in town, is attracting plenty of children, gift lists in hand, Anderson said.

Handmade crafts will provide the theme for a number of December events at the Fashion Mall at Keystone at the Crossing.

Hand-painted waterglobes will be available for \$3 to shoppers who spend at least \$100 at Fashion Mall stores. The globes are available at the mall's customer service center.

Last but not least, the Fashion Mall invites shoppers to give a gift to the Earth this year and recycle their Christmas trees into mulch.

Downtown will not be without festivities of its own, said Patrick Dooley, marketing manager for Union Station.

Union Station kicked off its effort in late November with the lighting of the station, fireworks, and a 35-minute originally choreographed show with 19 costumed characters, Dooley said. The \$50,000 event co-sponsored by Pepsi-Cola climaxed with the landing of Santa and his reindeer on the roof of Pan Am Plaza.

Union Station will feature performances by 300 local choirs, bands and orchestras all day every day throughout the season (except for Tuesday evenings).

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